The Psychophysiology of Politics

Stephan A. Schwartz

One of the central premises of American democracy is that the political process advances because of rational discourse discussing and responding to objective reality. Facts are dispositive, it is maintained, and through thorough and extended discussion compromises will be hammered out, and a majority view on the facts will emerge. The foundational example cited is the Constitutional Convention.

Each state sent a delegation to Philadelphia, and beginning on 25 May, 1787, a week later than originally scheduled, 55 widely divergent men, most arguing their own self-interest, came in state delegations. Over the next three months, they debated and, gradually, they settled on the facts, and compromised about how to address them. Out of it came the U.S. Constitution. In the end, 39 would sign the document. QED.

And it is true. If you closet dozens of people in a room for months on end, during a desperately hot and muggy summer, all there precisely because they are strongly motivated to create a Constitution, having tried and failed to create a viable state with the Articles of Confederation, it is likely you will get a result. But when was the last time you saw the American Congress lock itself in and debate day after day? A real debate, everybody in the room, passionate, challenges, and counter challenges until a deal is struck. Perhaps the Constitutional Convention is not really a very good example. Suppose it is, in fact, an outlier in the arc of the American political narrative. And suppose something further: Suppose much of what is happening is not about facts at all and is driven not by rational consideration, but by our psychophysiology, with almost no conscious awareness it is happening.

Over roughly the past 15 years, a confluence of the social and neurosciences has presented us with research findings that describe a politics driven by the psychophysiology far more than rational thought. In this emerging fact-based world, we are driven by hormones, group dynamics, and the way we respond to negative stimuli. In 2001, Roy Baumeister, Francis Eppes Professor of Psychology at Florida State University, reported

> The greater power of bad events over good ones is found in everyday events, major life events (e.g., trauma), close relationship outcomes, social network patterns, interpersonal interactions, and learning processes. Bad emotions, bad parents, and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good. The self is more motivated to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones. Various explanations such as diagnosticity and salience help explain some findings, but the greater power of bad events is still found when such variables are controlled. Hardly any exceptions (indicating greater power of good) can be found. Taken together, these findings suggest that bad is stronger than good, as a general principle across a broad range of psychological phenomena.[1]

Political psychologist John Hibbing, Foundation Regents University Professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, along with Kevin Smith and John Alford also in the Political Science Department, set out to explore this issue in depth and published their findings, "Difference in negativity bias underlie variation in political ideology," which was published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*: "…we argue that one organizing element of the many differences between liberals and conservatives is the nature of their physiological and psychological responses to features of the environment that are negative. Compared with liberals, conservatives tend to register greater physiological responses to such stimuli and also to devote more psychological resources to them… Politics might not be in our souls, but it probably is in our DNA."[2]

When one begins to delve into this literature that results from the new confluence of the social and neurological sciences, it very quickly becomes apparent how powerful and subtle these psychological and physiological influences can be. Simone Schnall, at the time a professor of psychology at the University of Plymouth in the U.K., now Fellow and Director of Studies in Psychology, Jesus College, Cambridge, led a team that came not just from her department but from the University of Virginia and Stanford University. Building on earlier work that had shown circumstantial sensorial experiences that provoked disgust resulted in participants rendering more severe moral judgments. They sought to confirm this, as well as measure whether sadness was more invocative than disgust in producing harsher moral judgments. They asked this question: "How, and for whom, does disgust influence moral judgment?"[3]

To answer it, they carried out four experiments in which participants were

The SchwartzReport tracks emerging trends that will affect the world, particularly the United States. For EXPLORE, it focuses on matters of health in the broadest sense of that term, including medical issues, changes in the biosphere, technology, and policy considerations, all of which will shape our culture and our lives.

asked to make a moral judgment while at the same time, were subjected to negative sense impressions. In the first study, a bad smell—that invoked disgust—was present in the room where they were asked to make this judgment. In the second, the room itself was disgusting. In the third run, they were asked to make the decision after recounting a physical disgusting experience. And, in the fourth, they watched a video. The fourth run also invoked sadness.

Schnall's team reported: "Four studies involving four different ways of inducing disgust found a causal relationship between feelings of physical disgust and moral condemnation. In addition, the results addressed four aspects of this relationship. First, we found that the effect of disgust applies regardless of whether the action to be judged is itself disgusting. Second, the results showed evidence of discriminative validity in that disgust influenced moral, but not additional non-moral judgments. Third, since the effect occurred most strongly for people who were sensitive to their own bodily cues, the results appear to concern feelings of disgust, rather than merely the primed concept of disgust. And fourth, that there is something special about the connection between disgust and morality was indicated by the fact that induced sadness did not have similar effects."[3]

How do these subliminal influences play out in a practical way with voters? When a polling place is a church, voters cast ballots right of center compared with ballots cast in public schools.[4] Think about that for a moment. A political operative who understands this new psychophysiology of politics could manipulate a values vote, simply by the selection of polling places. Who talks about any of this in the normal political discourse of cable news or newspaper. Virtually no one. Yet as Hibbing notes, "The relevance of subthreshold factors allows for the possibility that political temperament is systematically related to a range of psychological and physiological response patterns."[2]

Shalom H. Schwartz, at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in his research reported, "Basic values explain more variance in political attitudes and preferences than other personality and sociodemographic variables. The values most relevant to the political domain are those likely to reflect the degree of negativity bias. Value conflicts that represent negativity bias clarify differences between what worries conservatives and liberals and suggest that relations between ideology and negativity bias are linear."[5]

In Figure 1, from Schwartz, what he discovered can be expressed graphically:

Schwartz defines the "motivational goals" of his core value categories thusly:

- *Universalism*: Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature.
- *Self-direction*: Independent thought and action—choosing, creating, exploring.
- *Security*: Safety, harmony, and stability of society, of relationships, and of self.
- *Conformity*: Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms.
- *Tradition*: Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide.

And sure enough, the Gallup Organization reports: "Even as overall party identification trends in the U.S. have

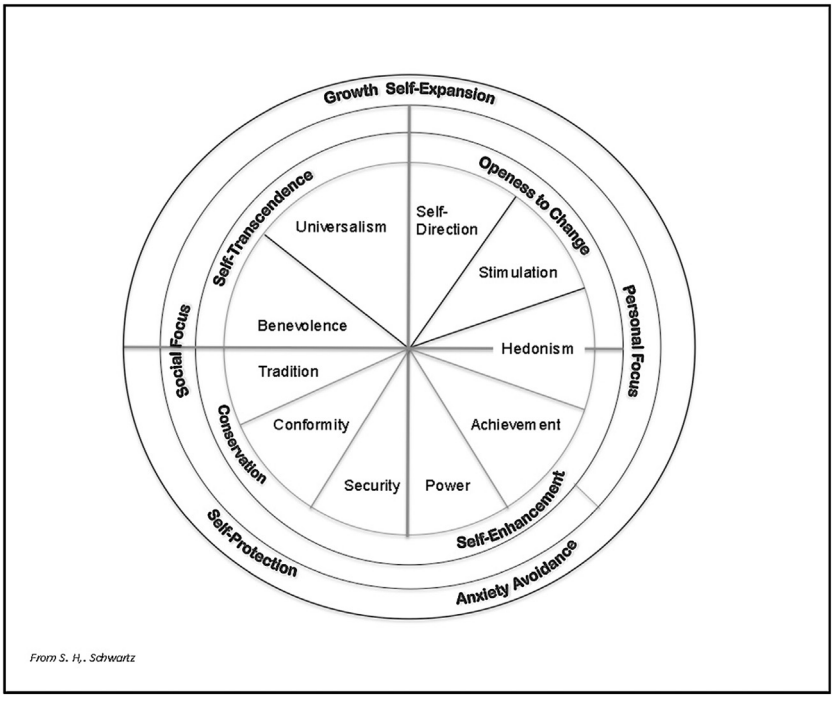

Figure 1. "The figure presents a circular motivational continuum on which 10 basic values are organized. The three outer circles specify principles that underlie and account for the organization of the values in the center. Any two values may express compatible or opposing motivations. The closer two values are in the circle (e.g., tradition and conformity), the more compatible their motivations; the more distant (e.g., tradition and hedonism), the more their motivations conflict." S.H. Schwartz.